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Willful Misinterpretation

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Willful Misinterpretation

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

by

Peter Hoffman

B.F.A. School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2004

May 2014

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Abstract

My work in painting and sculpture is an ongoing problem-solving activity in which the issues of how to present images or objects, and how to make a compelling piece of art, frequently clash. By combining a sense of earnestness in the means in which my work is made with self-conscious and deliberately awkward choices, my work occupies a place between pleasurable, visual abandon and the calculated, humorously abject. Through combinations of disparate elements, formal choices, and attitudes towards subject matter, I am making work that seeks to create new images within contradictions.

Keywords:

Painting, Sculpture, Abstraction, Humor, Modernism, Rococo

Introduction

When I was growing up in Wisconsin, I discovered my admiration for painting at the Milwaukee Art Museum and it was the first time I ever felt strongly about anything. Thinking back to that time of high school, with its many pointless, daily anxieties, I compare it to the joys I found in the museum's Bradley collection of modernist paintings. I saw the paintings in that collection as being about, or seeming to emphasize, formal color choices, regardless of time period or subject matter. Whether I was looking at early twentieth century paintings by Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Gabrielle Münter, Kees Van Dongen, Hans Hofmann, or more recent painting as exemplified by Alex Katz's *Sunny #4* (Figure 1), I accepted all of them equally as being able to capture life and to somehow make individual expression more meaningful through paint and color on canvas.



Fig. 1. Katz, *Sunny #4*, 1971

This early, earnest exposure to paintings in a museum setting, where a hundred years of painting history could be traversed within a short walk, affected my interest in the medium. My attraction to color and an abbreviated interest in the history of painting

would continue to influence my undergraduate work in Chicago, the years working outside of academic programs, and snapping into focus during my graduate studies at the University of New Orleans.

By first giving a brief background of the interests and work I was making before arriving in New Orleans, this thesis will trace the development of my paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures throughout my graduate career, the decisions that influenced my choices along the way, and the final work I chose to display for my thesis exhibition at the UNO St. Claude gallery in January 2014.

Background, and The Casual Landscape

Before explaining the work I completed during the graduate program, it is important to mention the influence of Henri Matisse's *Bathers by a River* (fig. 2) at the Art Institute of Chicago because it was influential in how I had developed my approach to painting. One of the aspects that I found continually compelling in *Bathers* and Matisse's work in general is a false sense of simplicity. He would obsessively rework images seeking a harmony of color, form, and image, and the end result would be a painting that looked as if it could have been dashed off in a day or two. However, in reality, he would agonize over compositions, colors, and paint applications, reworking paintings over and over for years; this was especially the case with *Bathers*.¹ At a glance his paintings looked simple but on closer inspection traces of choices were always left over.



Fig. 2. Matisse, *Bathers by a River*, 1909-17

¹ Stephanie D'Allesandro; John Elderfield. *Matisse: Radical Invention 1913-1917*. 346-49

The heroic struggle of completing a painting as exemplified by Matisse is an idea that I both admire and am simultaneously skeptical about. My skepticism comes from the present. Nearly a hundred years of art history have passed since Matisse painted *Bathers*, and a long time since that kind of thinking about making paintings has been invalidated by more contemporary doubts.

The idea of editing, of beginning a painting unsure of the end result and leaving evidence of many drastic choices along the way, appeals to me. My work is typically the result of many variations. Traces of those changes became a part of the painting. Whatever the subject matter of my paintings, I became fixated on leaving traces, whether an edge gave evidence of multiple color modifications, an area of flat opaque color revealed buried brushstrokes in raking light, or thinly- applied color left under- painted images or colors exposed.

When I moved to New Orleans to begin the graduate program I started with a series of small easel- sized paintings that initially began as a way to get to know the environment. Many of the plants I was looking at in the city I had never seen before, and they inspired a sense of childish amazement. Similarly, I spent a lot of time walking around the neighborhoods and looking at houses and buildings in various states of repair, some well-kept and colored hysterically in clashing paint work, and in direct contrast to the blighted, overgrown properties in complete shambles. All of these details interested me especially the sheer scale of differences in such close proximity. I was finding source material not just from observation of single subjects, but also in the total experience of contradictions: beauty with ugliness, order with chaos, excess with poverty. With these contradictions in mind, I began making a form of landscape painting that contained opposing relationships.

A good example of my concerns at the beginning of the program can be found in the painting *Moonbase* (fig. 3). This painting began as a lush landscape with bright green shrubberies taking up the majority of the canvas and an abbreviated, cartoonish line drawing of a palm tree leaning in from the right edge. These details have mostly been obscured, although knowing that they are still present through layers of transparent paint emphasizes the choice to obscure and simultaneously show.



Fig. 3. *Moonbase*, 2011

I am interested in presenting contradictions between the casual and humorous, and the high-brow expectations of accomplished painting. In *Moonbase* and other paintings from the very beginning of the graduate program, I was continuing my approach of courting absurdity through formal decisions. Still possibly visible as a warm, lush landscape, the painting became a cold-looking confusion of architecture. Part pyramid, part bio-dome, part sci-fi landscape, this painting began as an observation and ended in an intentionally awkward position between fantasy and reality.

After these first semi-observational landscapes I experimented with two directions of abstract painting. The first was the more serious (and immediately boring) approach that involved editing, obscuring, and paring down to almost nothing (fig. 4). In a sense it was entering in to the same existential crisis of finishing a painting that tormented so many heroic Abstract Expressionist painters seventy years ago, and one I did not feel confident enough to seriously pursue.

The second approach was a little better. Taking my preoccupation with modernist abstraction, and my kitsch-ier interests, I started trying to blend the two. *Johnny-5* (fig. 5)

took as its point of departure the robot protagonist of the film *Short Circuit*. With some of my titles, like *Moonbase*, I was perhaps trying to jazz up the paintings with goofy sci-fi titles, maybe to position them more closely to contemporary painting with the fear that it was looking too outdated. In this painting I attempted to get closer to the idea that anything could be source material, and finding humor in trying to capture something like the essence of the robot Johnny-5 in a quasi-Cubist approach.



Fig. 4. *Glacier*, 2011



Fig. 5. *Johnny-5*, 2011

Although I still enjoy these paintings, at the time I painted them I felt frustrated with the conversations I was having in critiques. I was struggling to find the correct way to talk about them. The humor I was finding in making choices, changing things, was not coming across as clearly to the audience. In a way it was like trying to explain a joke, one of those “I guess you had to be there” explanations that always invariably fall flat. By experimenting and reintroducing recognizable imagery I figured I could get past those awkward joke-explanation-feelings.

Balloons, Uncertainty, Gymnasts, and a Tiger



Fig. 6. *Paradise*, 2012

Looking for a new direction from my previous work, I briefly experimented with treating the painting as a sculptural object. *Paradise* (fig. 6) was a large-scale shift from the mostly small, muted, geometric paintings I was making. At approximately five and a half feet square, the canvas leaning against the wall is at the same time monumental and casual. Neutral grays interrupt hot, bright colors, references to plants are partially acknowledged and fall apart, and the text “Paradise” is mostly obscured in the chaotic layering. Four balloons hung above the painting, each carefully and evenly spaced, and chosen for their color to relate to the overall palette of paint. I thought of the balloons as demarcating an important celebratory event such as a garage sale, a birthday party, or the grand opening of a shopping center. The balloons gave a completely unstable excitement to the painting and installation, as all balloons are destined to deflate over time.

With *Paradise* I was trying to find a way to voice a sense of contradiction and humor that I felt was not coming through in my previous paintings. Although I feel this painting

met the intentions I had, I did not feel strongly about pursuing painting-as-sculpture, and began putting more emphasis on my drawing practice as a way to move into something new.

During the first half of the graduate program I had been working with printmaking as my minor, specifically screen-printing. For this work I decided to develop the type of line drawings I had been making in my sketchbook: quick representational drawings that are mostly made up of contour lines and without tonal shading. I was interested in trying to retain the intimacy and individual quality of the drawings in contrast to the medium's relation to mass production and the creation of editions.



Fig. 7. ABBA, *S.O.S.*, 1975



Fig. 8. *S.O.S.*, 2012

For subject matter I looked to music videos on Youtube, and made two groups of prints. The first set was based on ABBA's video for *S.O.S* (figs. 7 and 8), and the second on images from a variety of Kate Bush videos. For a while I had developed a bookmarked collection of humorously overdramatic music videos. What I really enjoyed about these videos was the sense of absurdity and sincerity rubbing shoulders. For instance, in the ABBA video, the content of the song lyrics seems to be about lost love, the need for companionship, and a plea to be rescued from a feeling of anguish. However, the music is catchy and upbeat, and the four members of the band smile and sway through the song.

There are a lot of funny moments I found watching this video: special effects used to no clear purpose, a few moments where one of the singers looks confused about the lyrics, problems with synchronized dancing, and for me, trying to figure out what they were wearing and the realization that the singers had enormous, smiling cats printed on their dresses. When I first saw *S.O.S.*, I was thrilled by the disjointed formal choices and decisions that went into the making of that video. It was a confusing, contradictory, and entertaining experience to watch and think of it as a culmination of ideas instead of merely accepting it as an awkward, early music video. I didn't really know what to do with that experience except to record it with a representational image and in effect, point to that experience as the art I was interested in.

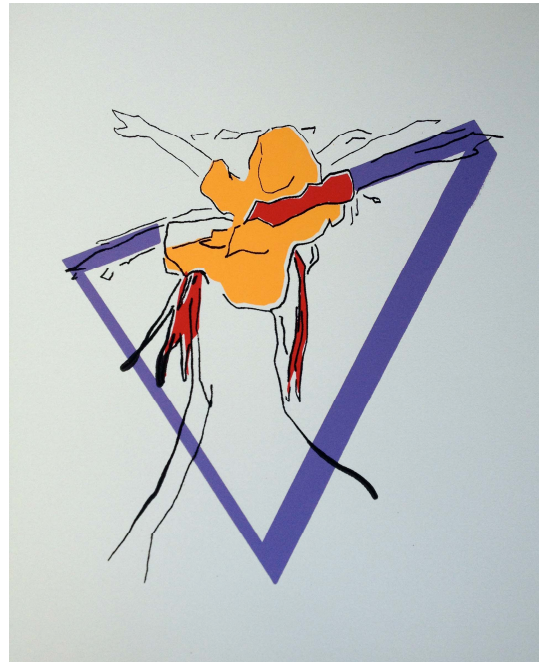


Fig. 9. *KB, Wuthering Heights*, 2012

The series of prints based on Kate Bush's music videos was a step forward from the *S.O.S.* screen-prints. With this second series of prints I was looking for a way to capture the sense of absurdity I was finding in my collection of music videos with a visual language that went further than just a recording of the source material. For example, with *KB, Wuthering Heights* (fig. 9) I attempted to convey not only the imagery within the music video, but also to create a new image that would extend into abstraction. The image I chose in the video

was Bush wearing a white, flowing gown, and spinning psychedelically with special effects leaving slow traces of her movements. By emphasizing the composition of the paused video with an oversized, triangular symbol I wanted to call attention to the formal construction of that individual shot, while also introducing elements of jarring color and abstraction as a complement to the strange aesthetic choices within the video.

The ABBA and Kate Bush prints were satisfying projects. I was learning the technical basics of screen-printing, introducing figures into my vocabulary, and developing a combination of line work with color registrations that would add up to an intentional and aesthetic print. However, I could not conceptually figure out how screen-prints were more intentional than drawings since I was not interested in creating printed editions. Printmaking held my interest as a side project and as a possible avenue for work in the future, but I became more excited about the possibility of drawing outside of the usual, observational sketches in my sketchbook.

In the summer of 2012, I was invited to do an exhibition at a Chicago gallery called The Storefront. I decided to do a series of small drawings that I could easily transport and set up in a small amount of time. Drawing at the time was a way for me to experiment without feeling as precious about the result as painting or printmaking. The first drawing lent the title to the exhibition, *Utopia* (fig. 10). The idea for this series of drawings was that I was pulling source material from all over and mashing it together. There was no hierarchy in my choice of subject matter. I combined elements drawn from observation, text, images from cereal boxes, the Olympics, comic books, patterns, and lamps drawn from the background of a paused television show. In other words, I was leaving myself open to the possibility of including anything that caught my attention.

I wanted to plow through imagery without hesitating and over-thinking my motives. The funny sense of freedom, essentially grabbing from a variety of sources, became utopic. An intentionally awkward endeavor, much like the misspelled text behind the victorious, long armed gymnast in the title image, the series became important for how I would reintroduce imagery into my paintings, and the self-appointed license to begin openly borrowing from a variety of sources.



Fig. 10. *Utopia*, 2012



Fig. 11. *Tiger*, 2012

I painted *Tiger* (fig. 11) shortly after the *Utopia* drawing series, and showed it in a critique alongside a number of other abstract paintings. The other works had small references to recognizable imagery, but lacked obvious subjects. The tiger painting was the oddball of the group, but the painting that received the most attention. Although the painting is equal parts formal paint concerns alongside a ridiculous and un-ferocious depiction of a tiger, I realized that my aim of creating an uncertain sense of humor became clearer, especially in direct relation to the other paintings. Similar to the way I had used combinations of imagery in the *Utopia* drawings, I began to think of painting more strongly in terms of how individual canvases could affect the reading of a whole body of work. I knew that I could not make goofy animals-walking-through-formal-color-choices paintings every time, but the idea of throwing a visual wrench like *Tiger* in with a bunch of self-conscious abstractions appealed to me. The appeal I found was in the way to knock down the perceived seriousness of abstract painting, while also elevating a fairly awkward image.

Painting History, Wallpaper, and the Grid

I have a book that was given to me as a gift when I was younger and showing an interest in art called *1,000 Years of Painting*. The book covers Western painting history from roughly 1000 A.D. to the 1980's, starting with church frescoes in Spain and ending with the paintings of Gerhard Richter and Jean Michel Basquiat. The book is one that has survived a number of moves and the purging that goes along with that process, but one I had not looked at in a very long time. I picked it up again, maybe out of boredom, maybe looking for ideas, but I remember looking at the book in a new way. Because *1,000 Years of Painting* is a truncated art historical survey, it is a strange experience flipping through it. It has a thousand years of painting history, essentially the greatest hits of painting, combined into an easily digestible coffee table volume of about 400 pages. The humorous simplification of painting history in this book appealed to me because it represented a failure. From its authoritative title and mission, the book seemed like an ambitious but ridiculous endeavor to record everything. I also enjoyed how the book was broken up. The goals of say, eighteenth-century French painting were treated equally to minor movements in modern twentieth-century painting, and it was amusing to see what the author chose to exemplify as important.

I started using the generalized history in *1,000 Years of Painting* as a source for material. Looking through pages of images I became interested in compositional tropes, or ways of organizing information in paintings that seemed to be repeated over and over, especially conventions specific to different genres of painting. For instance, in Titian's *Danae* (fig. 12), there are certain aspects of the composition that are repeated through history. Of course there are variations, but the organization is essentially the same. In the Titian painting, a female figure takes up and reclines along the lower left side of the horizontal canvas, and is balanced by a secondary figure in the background in the upper right. Just in terms of major compositional masses, the reclining figure and the secondary figure form a downward arc across the canvas, leaving the central area blank, or at least not as important as the rest of the information in the painting. The same organization is found in Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* (replacing the second figure for a mass of drapery), and later in Édouard Manet's *Olympia*, to name just a few examples.



Fig. 12. Titian, *Danae*, 1544-45



Fig. 13. *Medium Odalisque*, 2012

My goal in the painting *Medium Odalisque* (fig. 13) was to create the sensation of a known, almost innate, figurative composition in an abstract language. The composition employs a similar dispersion of elements to achieve a viewing experience that feels both accessible and unknown. While a figure is partially identifiable by the placement and proportions of exaggerated pinkish-orange skin tones, the painting relies more on other compositional choices to situate it in the realm of figuration. Intentionally thwarting information of the subject (in this case, a reclining figure) with diamond-shaped patterns, gestural paint marks, and a palette of bright, contrasting colors, I aimed to make an accumulation of formal paint decisions that would add up to an experience similar to visually reading historical figure painting. The title *Medium Odalisque* further roots the painting to its historical sources although in a diminutive, cheeky way. In countless paintings artists or historians use quantitative words to distinguish the size of one canvas from another, such as the *Grande Odalisque*. To be a part of, and at the same time distanced, from that tradition, I chose the word *medium*; a word that is neither this nor that, or both.

As an off-shoot of thinking about structures, conventions and compositional tropes, I began considering the grid as an exhibition structure to emphasize my own slippery relation to painting and its possibilities. The idea of painting different types of images and displaying them in equally spaced intervals appealed to me because it would enable me to create relationships between disparate works, and to create a visual network of contradictions that would be forced together.

I started a series of small paintings in the same spirit as the *Utopia* drawings, consciously trying to bring in source material from a variety of places without a sense of hierarchy. Some began as patterns to be disrupted, much like *Medium Odalisque*; others began as observational studies like my previous paintings; and others were taken from art historical sources, with aspects sometimes obscured and sometimes still present. I wanted a sense of controlled chaos in the variety of approaches being displayed together. Much like the combination of colors, subjects, and application of paint in each individual painting, the twelve grid paintings would become an overall image that could not be identified by just one part.



Fig. 14. Critique Installation, 2012

To further emphasize the equalizing display structure of the grid, I began thinking about wallpaper as a visual device to essentially frame the paintings and identify the individual canvases as being part of a single piece (fig.14). Not long after I began working with screen-printing I became interested in repetition and patterns and began incorporating those elements in my paintings as counter points to gestural brushwork. In the same way wallpaper, with its repetitive and predictable patterning, countered the variety of individual paintings.

While working on the grid paintings and looking through older historical paintings for source material I began looking more closely and responding to Manet's oeuvre. What I became interested in was his relation to art history and the non-hierarchical approach to painting in multiple genres. In the work from the early part of his career, roughly the

1860's, he based nearly all his compositions on historical models. This process was intentionally convoluted in that he would work with multiple references at the same time. Using painting history not only rooted his work in relation to the past, but also became a reflection on painting itself. Manet's paintings became less of a window onto the imagined or represented world of the painter, but instead a self- reflexive look at what made painting, "painting."

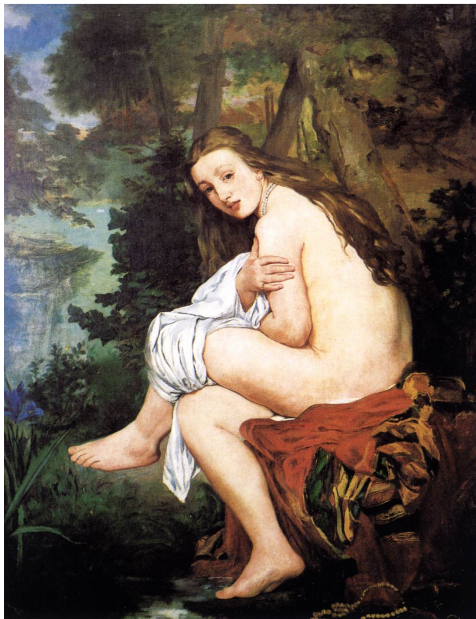


Fig. 15. Manet, *The Surprised Nymph*, 1859-61



Fig. 16. Boucher, *Diana after the Bath*, 1742

Manet's *Surprised Nymph* (fig. 15) is one of my favorite paintings and I respond to it for a few different reasons. In terms of how the composition and paint work, I enjoy the separation between the model and the landscape. They do not quite seem natural together. The harsh, frontal lighting on the figure seems like a product of the studio while the landscape in the background feels too disproportionally small for her. It looks as if Manet dropped one painting into the other, and his painting seems stranger the more one looks at it.

Reading about the history of *The Surprised Nymph* proved just interesting as the formal incongruities within the image. Manet based this painting on a variety of historical models: François Boucher's *Diana after the Bath* (fig. 16), Rubens' *Susannah and the Elders*,

Susannah by Rembrandt, as well as a number of etched reproductions.² While the practice of using historical models has been in place for hundreds of years and not specific to Manet, what I found fascinating about the history of this painting was the artist's ambivalent attitude to narrative and genre. The painting is a portrait of Manet's wife Suzanne Leenhoff in the flimsy guise of a nymph. However, with a few minor changes in props and scenery the painting went through a metamorphosis from biblical allegory (the story of Susannah and the Elders, and a play on his wife's name), to a mythological picture of a satyr surprising a nymph. Manet replaced the satyr with trees, leaving only the figure whom we are told rather unbelievably is a nymph.³



Fig. 17. *Nymph*, 2013

Attracted to Manet's painting for the reasons above, I decided to make my own copy (fig. 17). This painting came about in an unexpected way, and was not initially intended to be a copy. The canvas is the same size as the paintings in the grid series and was meant to be a part of that as an ever- growing series. Like a number of my paintings, I started this canvas without anything specific in mind, and just to get something on there, I painted a

² Françoise Cachin, *Manet, 1832-1833* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983.), 83.

³ Cachin, 86.

couple of elongated red blobs forming a lopsided L-shaped angle. After looking at those blobs floating around in the middle of the empty canvas for a week or so, I realized that they humorously mimicked the main forms of the torso and thighs in Manet's figure.

Thinking about Manet's relation to the old masters in his painting, I wanted to continue that lineage, and began using his image as direct source material. After crudely painting the landscape by imitating the major forms of light and dark, and approximating main colors, I decided to leave the figure as it was: a pair of blobs. At once part of a dialogue across time, *Nymph* was also a new image. I thought of my painting as both an earnest attempt to be a part of an artistic-heritage, and a funny, intentional failure that became an interesting image in its own right.

Planning ahead for my thesis exhibition, I became more interested in this relation to the old masters than trying to capture a sense of everything all at once with the grid model, and would set that idea aside for the moment. With *Nymph* and *Medium Odalisque* I felt like I had struck an outlet for humorously disrupting abstraction by looking backwards into painting history and using that history as source material.

Sculptural Parallels

During a trip to the Menil Collection in Houston I came across the ceramics of Ken Price for the first time (fig. 18). It was one of those moments where I almost missed them entirely, and then the more I looked at the small and plainly weird objects neatly displayed in their vitrine, the more I became engaged and increasingly fascinated with them. I found the pieces incredibly funny in the way they sat so awkwardly, in the color choices that didn't seem to relate to anything in the observed world. At the same time, the objects appeared to be dead-serious, and the result of specific, if elusive intentions. Seeing Price's work got me thinking about the possibilities of creating objects that could parallel my practice in painting.



Fig. 18. Price, *Untitled Cup (Geometric Cube Cup and Object)*, 1974

Early on in the program I had made a few crude sculptures out of cardboard and hot glue (fig. 19). I made these objects mostly to entertain myself. They are little junky things, made as an intentionally pathetic attempt to imitate the modernist grandeur of overbearing steel sculptures. These cardboard pieces were made at about the same time I was struggling to find a balance between serious abstraction and kitsch subjects, as in the painting *Johnny-5*. A few of them ended up being absorbed into paintings as subject matter.

In my mind, the cardboard sculptures were never quite enough to call a finished piece of work, but they did pique my interest in trying to find a sculptural equivalent to what I was doing with my paintings.

Switching my minor from printmaking to sculpture, I started experimenting with plaster at about the same time I began looking more closely at historical paintings. I found the process of going back and forth, of carving sculptures down and then building them back up with fresh batches of plaster yielded similar, unexpected results as with the paintings. Textural relationships became apparent in the combination of aggressive, carved rasp marks with untouched blobs of fresh plaster left to settle as they were.

In part I was imitating sculptural modes of representing the figure. For instance, by using the bust format of portraiture, or the standing and relaxed, full figure pose with one knee slightly bent forward (fig. 20), I was able to take liberties in how much or how little detail it would require to make a recognizable form.



Fig. 19. *Untitled*, 2012



Fig. 20. *Defeated Figure*, 2013

I made a number of loosely figurative sculptures that are all fairly small, and could easily fit on a mantelpiece, bookshelf, or could find themselves next to a plant or bottle in a modernist still life. Like the Price ceramics, the modest scale does a few things. The diminutive size of the plaster sculptures gives them a precious, museum-artifact quality, and also calls attention to their handmade quality. The glossy coats of oil paint and varnish emphasize the textural qualities and create an imagined experience of how the sculptures were made: how it felt to hold it in one hand, and carve with the other, or to watch wet blobs settle with gravity. As with my paintings, I wanted the viewer to see the history of choices as part of the finished piece.

I painted all of the plaster sculptures in the same manner as the canvases: a mixture of oil-paint with an enamel-like medium added to reduce the appearance of brush strokes, and varnished to catch and reflect light. The colors I chose were mixtures that I thought would look completely wrong or unnatural on classical sculpture, and relates back to my ongoing interest in setting up systems only to disrupt them, and in the process creating something unexpected.

To display the sculptures I built hybrid shelf/pedestals that position them on the wall, to emphasize the correlation to the canvases. Like my experiment with the grid, each box was an identical unit, spaced evenly to identify them as partially individual pieces, and also as part of a larger system.

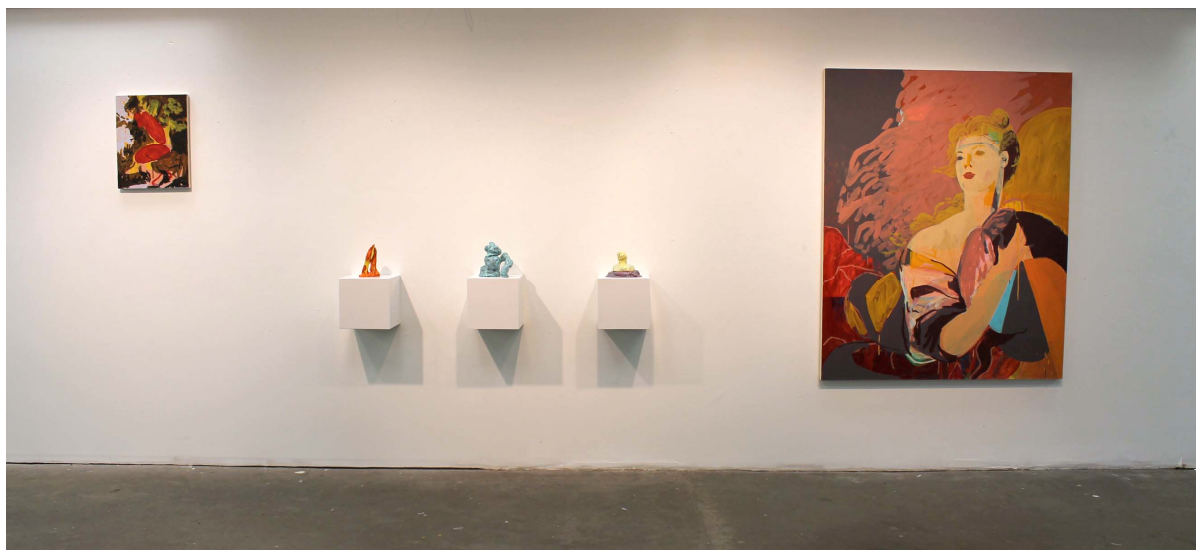


Fig. 21. Critique installation, 2013

Chubby Crimson Bottoms

At the same time I began focusing on old master paintings with *Medium Odalisque* and *Nymph*, I enrolled in an Art of the Nineteenth Century art history course. As a lead-up to the developments of the 1800's the course material began with French painting in the mid-1700's, the Rococo period. I immediately gravitated towards this period, which would provide the framework for my thesis exhibition, *Chubby Crimson Bottoms*.

What originally drew me to the work of Boucher, Jean-Honoré Fragonard (fig. 22), and others from this period was an overall absurdity to many of the paintings. To my contemporary eyes, I initially related them to post-war pin-up paintings: a kind of well-painted fluff akin to the work of Gil Elvgreen (fig. 23). The Rococo paintings were pure escapist pleasure commissioned by the French upper-class, and a reflection of official taste as sanctioned by the aristocracy. The paintings from this time period were decadent, excessive, and reflected a soft, pastel-colored world of luxury and ease. What really got me interested in the Rococo however came in the form of criticism from a detractor, the critic and philosopher Denis Diderot.



Fig. 22. Fragonard, *La Gimblette*, 1768



Fig. 23. Elvgreen, *Lucky Dog (Dog Gone Robber)*, 1958

Diderot was an outspoken critic of Boucher and the Rococo. Representing a sort of return-to-reason in response to aristocratic France's escalating extravagances, Diderot championed somber morality and condemned the frivolous joy he saw in the paintings being celebrated by nobility (Boucher's official patrons were King Louis XVI and his mistress, Madame de Pompadour⁴). In a famous review of the official Salon of 1763, he wrote the following about Boucher's work:

Paint the lot in the brightest colors, and there you have Boucher's Pastoral Scene... What a misuse of talent! How much time gone to waste! You could have had twice the effect for half the effort. With so many details all equally carefully painted, the eye doesn't know where to look. No air. No rest... This man is the ruination of all young apprentice painters. Barely able to handle a brush and hold a palette, they torture themselves stringing together infantile garlands, painting chubby crimson bottoms, and hurl themselves headlong into all kinds of follies which cannot be redeemed by originality, fire, tenderness nor by any magic in their models.⁵

In the same article, Diderot would go on to champion Jean-Baptiste Greuze's painting *Filial Piety*, for its idealistic model of proper behavior; a model steeped in sacrifice, toil, and depressingly noble misery.⁶ In somber colors Greuze's canvas shows a paralytic patriarch being attended to by his family. Surrounding him on all sides, the family members are depicted as giving their utmost attention and service to honor him. For Diderot, *Filial Piety* represented what art should be: a moral lesson, and a tool to show people how to behave. Instead of celebrating life, pleasure, imagination and beauty, which the Rococo epitomized, the work Diderot admired was a reminder of duty, mortality and sadness (figs. 24 and 25).

Reading this article I pretty quickly took the side of Boucher, who I thought of as the wrongfully accused underdog. From my initial reading of the Rococo paintings I had formed a similar, dismissive opinion, but to see a criticism leveled so low (and precisely voicing concerns in my own work) I wanted to re-examine the work for myself and prove that old prude Diderot wrong.

⁴ Jo Hedley, *François Boucher: Seductive Visions* (London: The Wallace Collection), 99.

⁵ Denis Diderot, "Salon of 1763" in *Art in Theory*, ed. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger (Malden: Blackwell Press), 603.

⁶ Diderot, 605-08.



Fig. 24. Greuze, *Filial Piety*, 1763



Fig. 25. Boucher, *The Birth of Venus*, 1740

Looking at the works of Boucher and Fragonard with a new reactionary interest, I began to admire the paintings as complicated depictions of excess. The paintings did not just depict subjects of excess. They were painted excessively with an enormous range of color, complex and purposeful brushwork, and compositions that keep the eye moving and discovering more within the paintings. With excess and abstraction in mind I began to implement Rococo forms into my paintings that continued from my interest in Manet's use of art history.

I based *Woman Holding a Dove* (fig. 26) on a Fragonard painting of the same title, although it was only partially faithful to the original source. The figure's gesture is the same and the colors, though exaggerated, convey the unique lighting particular to sunsets. I was not interested in attempting to engage Fragonard's painting techniques, which were a culmination of patient blending and glazes of paint. Instead, my version attempts to convey a similar amount of information in an abrupt and deliberately disjointed manner. In the original painting the figure clutches a dove to her chest and watches another in mid-flight. I replaced the doves in both places with harsh geometric shapes that stand in opposition to the flowing hair and undulating cloth.



Fig. 26. *Woman Holding a Dove*, 2013



Fig. 27. *Philosopher*, 2013

I had been going through images in a Fragonard catalogue looking for source material, and I found that he painted a portrait of Diderot at some point in the late 1760's. The historical record of this portrait is incomplete in that it is unknown whether it was a commission by Diderot or just a portrait Fragonard fabricated of the well-known contemporary figure.⁷ In any case, thinking about Diderot's opposition to the Rococo, I like to imagine that despite his protests, he too desired a portrait in the fashionable style just like the decadent aristocracy.

With this imagined narrative of Diderot's ideological corruption (or, at least contradiction) in mind, I painted *Philosopher* (fig. 27) as a visual representation of ideas at odds. The painting, like *Nymph* earlier, began with non-representational shapes as a way to have an under-painting to react to. However, unlike that painting, I layered the linear, portrait image of the philosopher on top of the existing marks as a way to create disruption. To complete the painting I continued adding more, with the goal of creating an uneasy balance. In some parts I would let colors work with the image, as seen in the mostly-faithful contour line that separates the figure from the background. In other places, such as the blob obscuring his beard, I was less respectful of the copied image and more interested in the overall effect of how all the painted elements were or were not working with one another.

After painting *Woman Holding a Dove* and *Philosopher*, I started thinking about how I was going to physically organize the UNO St. Claude Gallery for my thesis exhibition. Using historical figure paintings as source material I realized that I wanted to treat my work, and the exhibition as a whole, in a way similar to a museum experience. With that in mind, I began two more large paintings that would give the exhibition a sense of the monumental and historical as well as visually breaking-up some of the wall space in the gallery.

The Triumph of Venus (fig. 28) was the largest work in the exhibition, and in my mind, functioned as the centerpiece both visually and conceptually. I initially based this painting on a combination of two sources: Boucher's *Birth of Venus* (fig. 25), and a second *Birth of Venus* painting (fig. 29) based on Boucher's work by an unknown artist.

⁷ Pierre Rosenberg, *Fragonard* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), 263-66.



Fig. 28. *The Triumph of Venus*, 2013



Fig. 29. Unknown (After Boucher), *The Birth of Venus*, late 1700's

Much like Manet's *Surprised Nymph*, I was drawn to Boucher's painting and the copy because of their differences and their historical lineage, especially as the unknown artist's name has been lost. I began my painting at first using only elements from the original Boucher. However, after discovering the copy and looking at its overall composition I decided it would be a better source to use because it was closer in proportion to the canvas I had already started. Beginning on the painting again with this second composition, I left parts of the original layer visible, and created a fairly confusing mess of shapes, figures, landscape, sea, and sky.

Working on *Triumph of Venus* I was consciously creating more confusion and chaos, and then trying to find a balance of organization. With both of the sources I had been using I was completely engaged with those paintings and how they both contained such an amount of movement and activity, and I worked to emulate that sensation without being too concerned about the painting's legibility of representation. In fact, I was deliberately disrupting recognizable imagery, looking instead to create an abstracted equivalent to the feeling of the original paintings.

Looking at the pair of original *Birth of Venus* paintings, there are many points that have uncertain edges. I was interested in how the waves, cloth, and figurative elements flow into one another by fading and transitioning into something else, as is the case with the sea-foam in each painting that transforms into the images of enormous, gulping fish. In my painting as well, I emphasized this confusing transformation between parts making the lower half of the canvas a jumble of painted marks. The marks referenced figures and waves but also became pure painterly abstraction. Like the slippage of objects in the Rococo paintings, I was interested in the shifts between representation and abstraction.

The second large painting I made for the exhibition, *Repose* (fig. 30) further emphasized the awkward combination of figurative imagery with formal paint choices, and again related to a historical lineage. Based on Boucher's *Diana after the Bath* (fig. 16), I chose to use that painting as source material because of its influence in Manet's *Surprised Nymph*. Planning to exhibit my own *Nymph* in the exhibition, I also wanted a version of the original source to relate that painting to.



Fig. 30. *Repose*, 2013

The work I chose to exhibit at the UNO St. Claude gallery for my thesis exhibition was a combination of paintings and plaster sculptures that all dealt with representation of the figure (fig. 31). I had based each piece on a historical model with a focus on trying to capture the visual equivalent of source material, and then allowing formal choices to disrupt representation and become something new. Quoting from Boucher and Fragonard in many of the sources, and using Diderot's phrase *Chubby Crimson Bottoms* for the title, I was satirically situating all of the work in specific aspects of the Rococo that fascinated me: excess and visual pleasure. By willful misinterpretation of painting history I connected those ideas with my formal interests in abstraction, and created an exhibition of figurative work that was a combination of contradictory approaches.

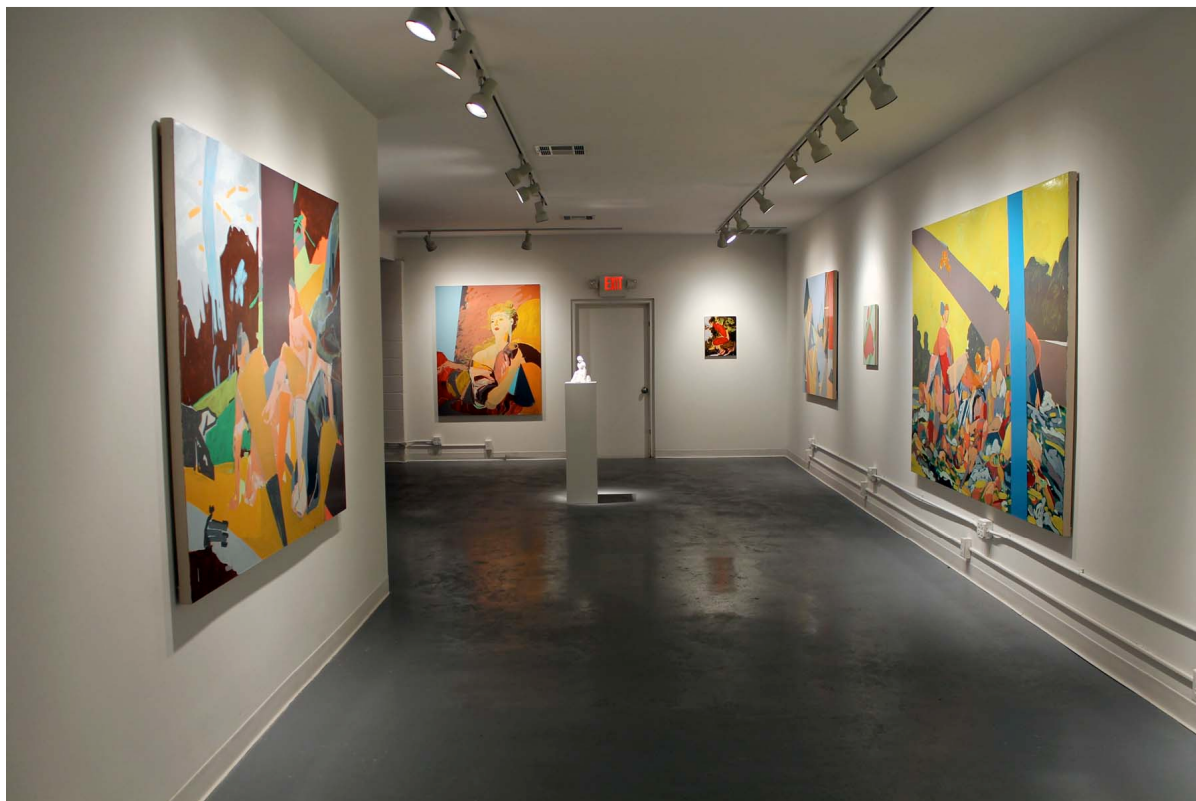


Fig. 31. *Chubby Crimson Bottoms*, installation view, 2014

Conclusion

My work is focused on a balancing of disparate concerns, both in visual terms and in conceptual approaches. My intention is to create images that can be read in multiple ways, from a sincere approach of expression through paint, to the humorously doubtful. The paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures I made during the graduate program have all reflected this interest to some degree. By continuously combining ideas of seriousness and humor through painted images and sculptural objects, I am engaging with the history of art to create new results.

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Vita

Peter Hoffman was born in Livonia, Michigan in 1981 and grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He received his B.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with an emphasis on painting and drawing in 2004, and also studied at the Marchutz School of Painting in Aix-en-Provence, France in 2006. Hoffman moved from Chicago to New Orleans to begin graduate studies at the University in 2011.